

Message Text

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S E C R E T TUNIS 3584

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR TS
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH

REF: TUNIS 5029, AUGUST 12, 1974

1. SUMMARY: CONSENSUS HERE IS THAT PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH HAS DETERIORATED FURTHER, BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE NINE DAYS AGO FOR REST CURE IN FRANCE HE WAS SHOWING TRACES OF BEING MORE THAN USUALLY VAGUE IN HIS THINKING. PEOPLE CLOSE TO HIM APPEAR TO BE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT HIS HEALTH THAN USUAL, PARTICULARLY HIS WIFE, WASSILA. PICTORIAL COVERAGE OF HIS ACTIVITIES IN FRANCE IS UNUSUALLY MINIMAL. WHILE EMBASSY JUDGES THAT HIS HEALTH IS NO DOUBT DETERIORATING FURTHER, PRESIDENT'S EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY FOR COMEBACK FROM ILLNESSES SHOULD NOT BE DISCOUNTED. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE JUNE 4 PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA HAS BEEN IN BRIDES-LES-BAINS, FRANCE FOR WHAT APPEARS TO BE A REST-CURE. WE HAVE HEARD, VARIOUSLY, THAT HIS VISIT WILL LAST TWO WEEKS (TUNIS NEWSPAPERS), THREE WEEKS, OR UNTIL HE LOSES THE CONSIDERABLE WEIGHT WHICH HE HAS GAINED DURING AND SINCE HIS STAY AT MEGEVES LAST WINTER. THE PRESIDENT'S REGIME HAS FOR MONTHS NOW BEEN SO FINELY TUNED, IN TERMS OF DIET, HOURS OF REST, AND EXERCISE THAT THIS UNUSUAL WEIGHT GAIN HAS REPORTEDLY CAUSED SEVERE CONCERN TO HIS DOCTORS.

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3. BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE THIS TIME FOR FRANCE, BOURGUIBA SHOWED TRACES OF BEING MORE THAN USUALLY VAGUE IN HIS THINKING. THUS AFTER A LENGTHY VISIT LAST MONTH TO THE AMERICAN PAVILION AT THE TUNIS INTERNATIONAL FAIR, DURING WHICH TIME HIS COMMENTS TO ME REFLECTED A FULL AWARENESS OF WHERE HE WAS, I HEARD HIM REMARK TO AN AIDE AS HE WALKED OUT, "LET'S SEE, THE NEXT PAVILION IS THE AMERICAN PAVILION, ISN'T IT?" ON THE OCCASION OF THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS RETURN TO TUNIS FROM EXILE, AN EVENT CELEBRATED ON JUNE 1 WITH GREAT ZEAL AND FAN-FARE HERE, BOURGUIBA'S SPEECH AT PARTY HEADQUARTERS WAS MORE RAMBLING AND REPETITIVE THAN USUAL. (YET, HE SPOKE WITH HIS CUSTOMARY VIGOR AND DYNAMISM, AND STOOD AT THE PODIUM FOR ALMOST AN HOUR.)

4. WE HAVE NOW HEARD THAT WASSILA BOURGUIBA, WHO IS WITH THE PRESIDENT AT BRIDES-LES-BAINS, IS DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S HEALTH. THIS IS SAID TO HAVE LED HER TO INTENSIFY BEHIND-THE-SCENES EFFORTS TO ENSURE THE FAILURE OF ANY ATTEMPT WHICH MAY BE UNDERWAY TO REPLACE HEDI NOUIRA AS SUCCESSOR TO THE PRESIDENT. WE HAVE ALSO HEARD FROM A WELL-PLACED TUNISIAN SOURCE (VIA AN AID OFFICIAL) THAT PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA, WHO REPROTEDELY IS DETERMINED THAT HIS SON SUCCEED HIM, IS ANXIOUS TO APPOINT BOURGUIBA, JR. AS PRIME MINISTER. IF TRUE, THIS COULD CONCEIVABLY SUGGEST THAT THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF RECOGNIZES THAT HIS HEALTH IS FAILING FAST. (THE LIKELIHOOD OF BOURGUIBA, JR. IN FACT TAKING OVER AS PRIME MINISTER IS QUESTIONABLE; HIS CONTINUED ILL HEALTH ARGUES AGAINST IT AND FURTHERMORE PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA SEEMS TO BE FIRMER IN THE SADDLE THAN EVER.)

5. WE NOTE THAT COVERAGE IN THE TUNIS PRESS AND TV OF THE PRESIDENT'S CURRENT STAY IN FRANCE IS LESS THAN IS CUSTOMARY DURING HIS ABSENCES FROM THE COUNTRY. NEWSPAPERS AND TV BOTH CONFORM TO RITUAL BY DAILY NOTING THE PRESIDENT'S PRESENCE IN BRIDES-LES-BAINS, BUT THEY ARE SHOWING FEW PICTURES OF HIM. FOR EXAMPLE, NORMALLY DURING SUCH ABSENCES THERE WOULD BE A DAILY TV CLIP ON THE EVENING NEWS SHOWING THE PRESIDENT ENGAGED IN SOME

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ACTIVITY OR ANOTHER, SUCH AS RECEIVING VISITORS. BUT THIS TIME THERE HAS BEEN MARGINAL PICTORIAL COVERAGE. WHAT WE HAVE OCCASIONALLY SEEN IS A PRESIDENT AT BRIDES-LES-BAINS WALKING WITH APPARENT DIFFICULTY, STRONGLY SUPPORTED BY A COMPANION.

6. IT IS EXCEEDINGLY DIFFICULT TO RENDER AN ACCURATE JUDGMENT AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT CONCERNING THE TRU STATE OF

PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH. DESPITE THE DOCTOR'S PROGNOSIS OF SEVERAL YEARS BACK THAT HIS CONDITION OF ARTERIOSCLEROSIS WOULD CAUSE HIS HEALTH TO DETERIORATE STEADILY, HE HAS FLUCTUATED BETWEEN IMPRESSIVE TOURS OF FORCE OF STRENGTH AND INTELLECT, AND MOMENTS OF ACUTE SENILITY INVOLVING MENTAL LAPSES. HE HAS POSSESSED AN EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY TO STAGE COMEBACKS FROM ILLNESSES, NO DOUBT PARTLY THROUGH SHEER WILLPOWER. BUT THIS TIME THE PEOPLE CLOSEST TO THE PRESIDENT APPEAR MORE CONCERNED ABOUT HIS HEALTH THAN USUAL, SUGGESTING THAT THEY DETECT FAILINGS MORE SERIOUSLY THAN PREVIOUSLY. THERE IS AN UNDEFINABLE QUALITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF EVENTS AND NEWS THESE DAYS --SOMETIMES IT IS AS IF THOSE IN THE INNER CIRCLE FEEL THEY CAN NOW TAKE DECISIONS WITHOUT WAITING FOR A WEAKENED PRESIDENT'S APPROVAL, OR FEARING HIS CHASTISEMENT. THIS TENDS TO LEND SOME CREDENCE TO TUMORS THAT BOURGUIBA "MAY NEVER COME BACK", OR THAT THIS MINISTER OR THAT MINISTER HAS DONE THUS-AND-SO BECAUSE HE KNOWS THE POWER CHANGE-OVER IS IMMINENT.

7. STILL, HABIB BOURGUIBA MAY WELL BE, AS HE ONCE BOASTED, "AN EXCEPTION TO MOST RULES." OUR LAST DETAILED APPRAISAL OF HIS HEALTH TEN MONTHS AGO (REFTEL) NOTED THAT INCREASING SIGNS OF FATIGUE AND SENILITY ON HIS PART WERE INDUCING MANY TUNISIANS TO BELIEVE THAT BOURGUIBA'S DAYS AS EFFECTIVE PRESIDENT WERE NUMBERED. BUT HE HAS "HUNG IN THERE" SINCE THEN WITHOUT REALLY COMPROMISING HIMSELF OR THE GOVERNMENT, AND HE COULD CONTINUE TO DO SO FOR AN INDETERMINATE PERIOD OF TIME. TODAY'S PRESS ANNOUNCES THAT ON JULY 26 HE WILL PRESIDE OVER FESTIVITIES MARKING THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF A SPORTS CLUB AT SOUSSE. OUR GUESS IS THAT HE WILL BE
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